

before it breaks

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/4643274) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/4643274>.

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Category:

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Fandom:

[Merlin \(TV\)](#)

Relationship:

[Merlin/Arthur Pendragon \(Merlin\)](#)

Characters:

[Merlin \(Merlin\)](#), [Arthur Pendragon \(Merlin\)](#)

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[Community: kinkme_merlin](#), [Hurt Merlin](#)

Language:

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Series:

Part 13 of [Merlin Fic](#)

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Stats:

Published: 2015-08-24 Words: 2,750 Chapters: 1/1

before it breaks

by [schweet_heart](#)

Summary

“It’s not what it looks like,” he says, hand still outstretched, barely a waver in his voice as he lies, *outright*, to Arthur’s face. “Sire, I can explain.”

“Can you,” Arthur says. He’s aware that he’s trembling, a seismic reaction to the outrage and denial still fighting it out inside his head, but he knows what he’s seen. What it must be. “Well, then, you’d better be quick about it, because it *looks* a lot like magic.”

Based on [this](#) kink meme prompt.

Notes

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Merlin, when he speaks, sounds oddly calm given the situation.

“It’s not what it looks like,” he says, hand still outstretched, barely a waver in his voice as he lies, *outright*, to Arthur’s face. “Sire, I can explain.”

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He’s gripping his sword-hilt without quite intending to, trying to calm his own rage. He can see Merlin’s eyes flicker down to it, tension in his shoulders. The other man is licking his lips, an expression on his face like he’s trying to come up with an acceptable explanation, and his hand is still outstretched. He looks like a total idiot, which isn’t unusual. It makes Arthur even angrier.

“Well?” he snaps. “I’m waiting.”

Merlin’s face crumples like a child’s and his hand drops to his side. “I’m sorry,” he says. “Arthur, I’m so — so sorry. I didn’t mean for you to find out like this.”

So, it’s true then. Merlin has magic. Arthur takes a step back, thinking about a number of things that suddenly make sense, from Merlin’s inexplicable good luck to the gleam of gold in his eyes that up until now Arthur has managed to convince himself is merely a trick of the light and his own fancies. Merlin’s shoulders drop and he crumples still further, folding in on himself like a puppet with his strings cut

and slumping onto a log.

“What are you going to do with me?” he whispers, looking at his hands.

Arthur glares at him. “That’s for me to decide.”

Merlin doesn’t say anything else, for which Arthur is grateful. It’s still dark, just at the first edge of dawn, and the bandits are dead in the woods behind them, so there’s no one else who could have seen what Merlin had done. Small mercies. Arthur’s hands are cold, the joints stiff and aching from being curled into fists. Merlin had saved his life. More than once, he realises now. Yet the knowledge of his secret, that he’s been hiding something like this for so long, still cuts like a knife when Arthur turns it over in his mind. So many lies, so many betrayals. His father had warned him that as a man of royal blood he could have no true friends, only allies and not-quite enemies, but never has the truth of it made him feel so alone.

“When it gets light,” Arthur begins. He walks away from Merlin to the edge of the clearing, peering up at the cobalt sky. He’s not quite sure what he’s going to say, thinking it through as he goes. “When it gets light, I’ll take you back — “

And that’s when Merlin bolts into the woods.

Merlin, Arthur learns, is faster than he looks, certainly faster than he usually is going about his ordinary business. Arthur had known that insouciant slowness was an act, really; he’d seen Merlin’s sly grins

when Arthur took him to task for being late, or lazy, or having the general momentum of a sleeping donkey. As it is, it only serves to remind him how much of his life is built on a false foundation.

“Merlin!” he shouts, plunging after the fleeing sorcerer into the darkness. “What the bloody hell do you think you’re playing at?”

Merlin is too far ahead of him to reply, even if he’d wanted to, because Arthur is slowed down by his mail and armour and carrying a sword, which makes sprinting through the underbrush difficult, especially in the middle of the night. Cursing, he follows the trail of broken branches that Merlin is leaving and tries not to imagine all manner of wild beasts and monsters that might be attracted by all the noise. Merlin never did use the sense he was born with. Living as a sorcerer in the heart of Camelot — in the prince’s *household* , of all places — was surely sufficient proof of that.

When Arthur catches up with him, Merlin is sprawled on the ground clutching at his ankle, and Arthur’s first thought beyond a vague sort of satisfaction at not having lost him is a general impatience with Merlin’s incompetence. If the idiot hadn’t decided to go haring off in completely the wrong direction, he wouldn’t have gone and injured himself and given Arthur a great deal more work to do to get them both back to Camelot.

“Merlin,” he starts, meaning to ask what had possessed him to start running in the first place. Merlin has never been good at running, even if he was swifter than expected. But Merlin’s expression when he hears Arthur’s voice stops him in mid-sentence. He looks terrified, like Arthur’s the last person he wants to see in the middle of a dark forest with a twisted ankle. Like *Arthur’s* the monster in this scenario.

“A-Arthur,” Merlin stutters. He’s let go of his leg and is trying to crawl away backwards, digging his hands into the soft dirt to pull himself along. It has to hurt — his face is bone white, and if Arthur squints he almost thinks he can see tears on his cheeks, his mouth trembling and

his breathing shallow and fast.

“Merlin, what are you doing?” Arthur demands, stepping towards him. “Stop that, you’re hurting yourself.”

Merlin doesn’t seem to hear, or if he does, he pays Arthur no mind.

“Please,” Merlin stammers, still crawling. “I won’t — I won’t cause any trouble, I don’t want to hurt anyone, I only ever used it to protect you, I swear. Please just let me go.”

“Let you go?” In spite of himself, Arthur snorts. “You’d be dead before you’d gone ten steps. Look at you.”

It’s a small exaggeration, but not by much. If there’s a bear trap in the forest, Merlin will find it, and then what is Arthur supposed to do? In any case, Merlin is hardly fit to walk back unaided; if possible, his face has gone even whiter, and he looks as if he’s about to be sick.

“All right,” he says, and his voice is horribly small, and even through his anger Arthur is starting to realise that something is not quite right here. “All right, if you must. But please, I — just do it quickly, all right? I don’t want Gaius to have to watch me burn.”

Finally, it dawns on Arthur that Merlin is afraid. Of him. The thought rocks him back a step, actually shocks him into staggering, as does the realisation chasing on its heels. In Camelot, sorcerers die. Arthur knows the law as well as anyone, and yet the idea had not occurred to him. He’s not sure which thought is the most damning: that he had never even contemplated killing Merlin, or that Merlin genuinely believed he would.

“Merlin,” he says again, forcing himself to moderate his tone. He crosses to Merlin’s side in a few quick steps, then pauses as Merlin visibly flinches. At least he’s stopped scrambling to get away, but the resigned sag of his shoulders is almost as painful. Carefully, Arthur kneels beside him. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

He moves slowly, unbuckling Merlin’s boot to reveal the injured ankle. With his hands on Merlin’s skin, he can feel the other man trembling; this close, the ragged hitch of Merlin’s breathing is all too audible. Arthur tries to put it out of his mind, to focus on the fevered heat of the limb beneath his fingers. It doesn’t seem to be broken, thank god, but now that he’s removed it from the boot it’s beginning to swell at an alarming rate, and the touch of Arthur’s fingers makes Merlin cry out, in spite of his attempts at gentleness.

“A bad sprain,” he concludes, sitting back. Merlin’s gaze hasn’t left him since he arrived, but when Arthur glances at him he looks down, at the dirt-covered hands twisting in his lap. “I’ll have to tear off the bottom of your tunic to wrap it, but it should be right in a day or two. You’ll have to keep your weight off it for a while.”

Merlin nods, a shaky jerk of the head.

“Merlin.”

His shoulders are up around his ears and he’s still crying. He looks miserable.

“*Merlin*,” Arthur says, helpless. For a moment, he considers leaving; he doesn’t want to distress him any further, doesn’t know how to put this right. Merlin is hiccupping and gulping air without stopping, edging towards hysteria, and Arthur is worse than useless when it comes to comforting people. He isn’t even sure he understands how all of this came about. Does Merlin truly believe Arthur would kill him? He

thinks he ought to be insulted, but instead it just hurts. All of it hurts.

Finally, he sighs. “You great idiot,” he says, and gathers Merlin into his arms.

It's full dawn before Merlin finally calms down. Arthur is fairly sure that he's only quiet out of exhaustion; they're both of them bruised with it, shadows under their eyes. Merlin is still and pliant in his arms, his eyelashes wet, and his eyelids flicker oddly from time to time, like he's dreaming.

“You're safe here, you know,” Arthur tells him. He can say that sort of thing when Merlin's sleeping, when there can be no repercussions. “I know what you are, now. I'm going to keep you safe.”

Merlin shifts in his sleep, but doesn't wake.

Arthur returns from gathering firewood in the late morning to find Merlin awake and on his feet, clutching a tree for support and panting thickly. He drops the wood, runs to take Merlin's arm.

“I told you to keep your weight off it,” he scolds. Merlin is holding onto him, hard, and for a moment he's worried this is going to turn

into another panic attack. “You’re going to make it worse.”

“You left,” Merlin accuses.

“You were cold. I needed wood for a fire.”

The two of them stare at each other for a long moment. Merlin’s eyes are red-rimmed, but he doesn’t seem as frantic now, his breath evening out.

“I thought you’d decided to abandon me.”

“Hardly.” Arthur doesn’t have to think before scoffing. “I told you, you wouldn’t last a day.”

Merlin’s smile is small, but it’s there. Arthur makes sure he’s sitting comfortably then sets about starting the fire, like this is any other day and nerves aren’t setting his teeth on edge. He glances at Merlin from time to time to check he hasn’t run off again. Not that he could, but knowing Merlin, he might still try.

He hands Merlin the first bowl of gruel when it’s cooked, and sits down beside him. Watches as Merlin eats it all without complaint.

“So,” he says. “You’re a sorcerer.”

Merlin bows his head. “Yes,” he says. “I am.”

They go back to where the bandits' bodies are lying and bury them all, on Arthur's insistence. Merlin sits beneath one of the trees and waves the corpses into the hole Arthur dug, one after the other. It makes things easier, for which Arthur is grateful, but it's still a strange sight, made all the more eerie by the carnage that surrounds them. The knowledge of it sits uneasily in his gut. He's going to have so much to hide, now. They're going to have to be so careful.

"I'm not going to pretend I'm not angry with you," he'd told Merlin, back in the clearing. "You lied to me. For *years*, Merlin. But I can't exactly hand you over to my father, either. I won't."

"Why not?" Merlin flinched when Arthur looked at him. "It's a valid question."

"I don't know."

"That's not an answer."

"Well, it's the only one I have," Arthur had snapped. Merlin hadn't asked again.

Watching him now, as Arthur carefully settles the earth back into place over the impromptu grave, he wonders if Merlin's thinking about it, about how easy it would have been for Arthur to merely run him through and add him to the pile. Easy. He shakes his head. Nothing about Merlin has ever been easy, and this has been hardest of all. Without quite meaning to he says, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Merlin doesn't look away from where Arthur's hands are buried in the soil.

"I thought you'd hate me."

Hate me. Not 'kill me.'

"It matters that much to you, what I think?"

Finally, Merlin raises his eyes to Arthur's face. "It's everything," he whispers.

Arthur has no idea how to respond to that, so he doesn't answer.

Arthur has nightmares about that look on Merlin's face. They stay in the woods for another two days, until the swelling of Merlin's ankle goes down, and then another day for good measure, and the entire time they hardly talk to each other and Arthur barely sleeps. He bathes Merlin's feet in cold water every day and Merlin lets him do it without wisecracks or jokes about their respective stations. It almost feels like he's waiting for something, but Arthur doesn't know what.

In a way, Arthur is glad of the silence. It gives him time to think. Merlin has betrayed his trust, lied to him, kept things from him. It could be argued that he'd had good reason, at least in the beginning.

But after? Running from Arthur in fear, pleading with him to kill him swiftly, crawling away on his hands and knees? How afraid he must have been, living in Camelot. How many executions he must have witnessed, and Arthur barely lifting a finger to stop them. No wonder he'd been so terrified when Arthur found out.

Guilt makes Arthur angry. He storms around their makeshift camp, recounts their supplies, thinks about going hunting to work off some of his excess energy. Merlin is watching him warily again, which only makes him feel worse. Arthur is not his father. He doesn't have the confidence to shake off Merlin's unease like so much dust from his shoes. He's never been comfortable ruling through fear.

"Stop looking at me as if I'm going to bite you," he growls at last, scowling.

Incredibly, Merlin's lips twitch. "Perhaps if you didn't look quite so ferocious," he says. He's joking, but Arthur is suddenly tired of games and of self-doubt. He stalks towards Merlin, drawing his sword as he goes, not missing the way Merlin's eyes go wide with alarm. He throws it at his feet.

"Take it."

"What?"

"Take it, I said." Merlin reaches for the hilt, tentative, and Arthur glares. "Hold it to my throat."

"What?" Merlin recoils, nearly dropping the blade. "Arthur, no — "

“Do it,” Arthur orders. “Or so help me, Merlin, I will dismiss you from my service and you can find your own way back to Camelot. Alone.”

It shouldn't be much of a threat, really. He's not even sure he means it. But Merlin picks up the sword, shaking a little, holding the point of it to Arthur's neck where the Adam's apple presses against his skin. He has to use both hands to keep it steady.

Arthur looks at him. “Now will you believe I trust you?”

“It was never your trust I wanted,” Merlin says. The sword dips, sags. Arthur pushes it aside and moves closer, intent.

“Then what do you want?”

Merlin shakes his head like he's dislodging a fly, biting his lip so that nothing more can come out. Arthur wants to shake the truth out of him, but he's already looming, and if he doesn't want Merlin to be afraid of him he's not really doing a very good job. Merlin must be so tired of being afraid.

“Do you want to come back to Camelot with me?”

Slowly, Merlin nods.

“Do you want to stay on as my manservant?”

Another nod. Arthur sits beside him, not touching, arms wrapped around his knees for warmth.

“You saved my life back there, you know,” he says, after a moment. “I should probably thank you.”

“Probably.” Merlin is smiling again, but also crying, and Arthur spares a second to roll his eyes at how ridiculous and inconsistent his manservant is before pulling him close. There’s no one around to see them, after all. “Pity you’re too much of a prat to say it.”

“Pity,” Arthur agrees.

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